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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the results of two studies on rural superintendents' attitudes toward school choice. A 1990 survey of 824 superintendents in Arkansas, Iowa, and Minnesota, where school choice had been implemented for 1-2 years, found that slightly more than half favored legislation permitting parents and their children to choose schools outside their resident district. However, superintendents overwhelmingly rejected the validity of all arguments in favor of choice and claimed that choice did not have a significant impact upon enrollment or funding. Superintendents agreed with two of the beliefs of the opponents of choice, and were divided on the remaining two. In the 1992 follow-up study of 947 rural superintendents in Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska, the majority of superintendents reported that location and convenience was the primary parental reason for choosing another district. They reported that school choice legislation had had no impact upon course offerings. As in the previous study, the respondents overwhelmingly rejected arguments supporting choice and seemed to be moving to the neutral zone on arguments opposing choice. This paper concludes that choice has not made a difference. (KS)

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School Choice: Has It Made A Difference?

A Comparison of Two Studies

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Introduction

Policy development issues have been an abiding interest of these writers for several years. This may relate to some extent to background including political science/social science and further training in the administration and management fields. The greatest motivation for the study of school choice, however, came when then Missouri Governor, John Ashcroft returned to the state from the national Governor's summit with President George Bush. The "word on the street" after the summit at colonial Williamsburg seemed to be that the nation's leaders had hammered out national goals, a national agenda for education reform and that the catalyst for change might well be the creation of schools of choice.

The present interest on the part of the public in schools of choice can be traced most directly to the 1988 Minnesota statute which began the serial phase-in of choice over several years. By 1990, when the writers were seriously involved in the study of choice, two other states, Iowa and Arkansas were undertaking choice and two more, Nebraska and Ohio had also approved choice legislation. The reader will note the adjacency of these states to Missouri.

The first study we conducted was an effort to determine what impact superintendents of schools could perceive in the states where choice was underway (Minnesota, Iowa and Arkansas). Today the number of states in one stage or another of implementation has risen to twelve. These include the five mentioned earlier, plus ". . . Wisconsin, Washington, Vermont, Utah, Idaho, Colorado and Kentucky. Other states including California have school choice on the legislative agenda."[1]

In arguing against the concept of choice, Jonathan Kozol has turned the clock back to 1954. "The first time I heard of schools of choice, it was after the Brown decision in the 1950's, when schools in many southern states set up schools of choice--that was the word. They called them Freedom of Choice Schools as a ploy to avoid desegregation. That's the history."[2]

In the 60's and 70's most of the effort in this arena was focused on two legislative delivery systems; tuition tax credits and vouchers. Either plan was seen by advocates as a way to provide funding for parents who sought private schooling for their children. Private schools proliferated during this period, with almost ten percent of the students in the nation attending some sort of non-public school. Later the popularity of home schooling as a further alternative would also rise.

The Reagan years featured even more discussion about choice but not much action. The dominant feature of those years was the study of public schooling by national panels which sparked debate which still rages over school reform and restructuring. When President Bush moved into the Oval Office, with strong conservative support, the call for school choice was renewed. During the Bush years, however, the focus shifted from choice between public and private schools to choice among public schools. The twelve states with plans afoot at present, represent this type of school choice.

This "new" approach to choice expects the pressure of the free market to result in the necessary incentive for complacent public schools to improve. Theoretically, those schools which do not improve could be forced into a sort of educational bankruptcy and have to close their doors. Their

spirit is conveyed in this statement from an article in The Saturday Evening Post. "After decades of bureaucratic decline, people took to the ballot box to replace failing bureaucracies with market forces. The results: new creativity, improved performance, and higher achievement."[3] And from USA Today, "Backers of school choice criticize the public school monopoly for being unresponsive to parents. They argue that if parents are able to take their dollars to what ever school provides the service they want, competition will force public schools to shape up."[4]

Opponents of this approach point out that it is very difficult for many already financially stressed districts to improve in the face of departing students and corresponding losses of funding. They fear students will leave smaller districts for larger ones with more successful sports programs, for instance. Others have opposed the concept because they have seen it as a way to hamper desegregation plans. "Proponents of choice for desegregating of schools argue that choice allows poorer families to make choices that richer families make when they move into neighborhoods with exceptional schools, send their children to private schools, or exert influence in their existing settings."[5] Still others have predicted choice laws would permit or encourage white students to move to the suburbs; so called "white flight." In reality, however, the laws in most states have been very careful to avoid impacting of racial balances, particularly with regard to schools which are under court order to integrate. It is important to note that there are some documented cases, at this point, of white students moving in significant numbers to surrounding districts which already boast large white populations. In Des Moines, Iowa, for instance where ". . . one in five students is a member of a minority group . . .

This year, 236 students used open enrollment to leave the district. Only 11 (5 percent) were minority students. Four qualified for reduced price lunches."[6]

One other development in the choice arena has been the advent of schools operated by private for-profit corporations. In the Kappan column "Stateline", Chris Pipho noted last year, "The idea that a private for-profit group should compete with the public schools in educating children . . . moved a step closer to reality over the summer. Whatever monopoly teachers, administrators, and school boards hold over publicly supported education seems destined to be questioned, if not changed outright."[7] Pipho went on to discuss the departure of Yale President Benno Schmidt to head a chain of private corporate schools.

Writing in Inc., Edith Conlin outlined the rise of Educational Alternatives, Inc., a Minneapolis based group seeking to operate schools at a profit. "In June of 1990 EAI was one of 7 entrants from a field of 35 to win a contract with the fourth largest school district in the country." The contract was to operate South Pointe Elementary School, opening in the fall of 1991."[8]

What does all this activity relating to choice and privatization really mean? Well, perhaps the best place to start is to question the school superintendents in states where choice has become law. Table 1 contains a summary of data regarding the initiation of choice in four of the original choice states; states with the longest experience with this approach. We will then move to a review of results of the two studies conducted by this research team.

TABLE 1

CRITERIA	ARKANSAS	MINNESOTA	IOWA	NEBRASKA
LAW APPROVED	1989	1985	1988	1989
BEGAN IMPLEMENTATION	90-91	88-89	88-89	90-91
	(In Iowa # of transfers limited to 5% during first year and 10% second year.) (Minnesota only permits transfers from small districts this year.)			
APPLICATION DEADLINE	Feb. 1	Jan. 1	Sept. 15	Jan. 1
FULLY IMPLEMENTED	90-91	90-91	91-92	93-94
APPROVAL TIME	60 Days Advance		15 Days	30 Days or Feb. 1
BOARD MAY ELECT NOT TO ADMIT NON-RESIDENT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LONG TERM COMMITMENT	None	1 Year	4 Years or family move	Only once
RACIAL BALANCE	Limits for racial balance	May set number in advance		First priority is racial balance
ATHLETIC ELIGIBILITY	Ineligible 1 Year		Ineligible 1 Year	May lose eligibility

A Comparison of Two Studies

The first study (hereafter referred to as the 1990 study) involved 824 superintendents in the states of Arkansas, Iowa, and Minnesota. Based upon the 74% return (824 out of 1109), the demographic information below was gathered.

1. The typical respondent represented a rural school with an enrollment of 1,000 students or less in a community of fewer than 5,000 people.
2. Slightly more than one-half (51.6%) of the superintendents favor legislation permitting parents and their children to choose schools outside their resident district.
3. Choice did not have significant impact upon enrollment or funding.

A major portion of the 1990 study was dedicated to the superintendents' attitudes toward choice. The superintendents were asked to respond on a five point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to eight statements regarding choice. Four of the statements represented the major beliefs offered by proponents of choice. The remaining four statements were the major beliefs of the opponents of choice. These results are reported in Table 2.

Even though the superintendents support legislation permitting parents to choose schools, they overwhelmingly rejected all of the arguments for choice. More than one half (52.2%) of the superintendents rejected the major reason offered by the supporters of open enrollment. That is, the belief that choice will create competition, thus improving schools, has not convinced the respondents in this study that schools will improve as a result of the mandate.

The last four items in Table 2 are the arguments offered by choice opponents. Here the superintendents agreed with two of the beliefs and

were divided on the remaining two. Specifically, the statements that choice is another name for vouchers and choice encourages recruiting are points of agreement by the administrators. Still undecided are the issues of choice leading to racial segregation and its resulting in school district consolidations.

TABLE 2
Superintendent Responses (percentages)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Choice will improve parent participation.	17	36.6	19.5	23.3	3.6
2. Choice promotes competition among districts, improving quality of schools.	19.8	32.4	16.5	28.4	2.9
3. Choice will expand educational opportunities for low- and moderate-income families.	29.1	37.9	15.4	15.4	2.2
4. Choice will identify districts in need of special services.	15.2	34.9	22.6	24.1	3.2
5. Choice is another name for school vouchers.	9.7	23.0	22.7	35.9	8.7
6. Choice will lead to racial segregation.	7.5	28.7	36.2	22.7	4.9
7. Choice encourages athletic or other activities recruiting.	6.9	17.5	15.4	42.2	18.0
8. When fully implemented, choice will result in many school district consolidations.	9.1	32.0	22.2	29.5	7.2

Summary

The 1990 study was designed to determine the initial impact of choice legislation on school enrollments and funding issues. Additionally, its purpose was to measure superintendent attitudes toward choice.

Based upon the results of this first study, the researchers have concluded that choice has not had a significant impact upon enrollment or funding. Secondly, while superintendents favor choice, they tend to reject the major arguments offered by its proponents. In addition, they tend to agree with the choice opponents on at least two key issues.

Second Study

The follow-up study (1992) was designed to gather more data regarding the issue of choice. It was expanded to ascertain reasons that parents have given for choosing or leaving a district. An additional component was included to measure the impact upon the curriculum. The list of arguments for and against choice was increased as well.

Additional questions were included to address three major questions not included in the 1990 study.

1. What causes parents and their children to leave a school?
2. What causes parents and their children to choose a school?
3. How have course offerings been affected because of choice?

The second survey encompassed 1,499 school superintendents in Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska. A return of 947 (63.2%) confirmed some of the earlier findings and revealed new information in specific areas.

Again, the typical respondent represented a rural school district with an enrollment of less than 1,000 students in a community of fewer than

5,000 people. More superintendents (56.1%) favor legislation permitting choice while its impact is minimal upon enrollments, both in number of students lost and students gained. Nearly one-fifth of the districts, mostly in Iowa and Minnesota, have suffered losses of revenue of $10,000 or more. These losses are being reported over a longer period of time and represent a cumulative effect on funding.

One of the more significant differences between the two studies is the reason parents are giving for choosing or leaving a school district. In the second study, superintendents are asked why parents leave their school district. Nearly two-thirds (63.8%) of the districts which have lost students report that location/convenience was the primary reason given by parents. Another question dealt with why parents chose another district. Of the districts which reported gaining students, almost one-half (45.5%) cite location/convenience for choosing another school. An additional one-third (30.9%) list academics/curriculum as their major reason for choosing another district.

Another major difference between the two studies is the measurement of choice upon the curriculum. This legislation has had no impact upon course offerings, either in the addition or deletion of classes. In the rare situations that classes were added, they were in the area of foreign language.

Four beliefs pertaining to choice were added for the 1992 survey. Two were arguments favoring choice, and two were in opposition of choice. Regarding those beliefs in favor of this issue, there were no differences in the results of both studies. That is, superintendents, while they indicated being in favor of this legislation, generally disagree with the

proponents of school choice. For the most part, the respondents overwhelmingly rejected the statements which favor choice.

On the other hand, superintendents seem to be moving to the neutral zone on those statements opposing choice, with two exceptions. The respondents strongly disagree with the statement that choice leads to recruiting of students and are fairly evenly divided on the remaining issues.

These results are tabulated in Table 3.

TABLE 3

A Strongly Disagree	B Disagree	C Neutral	D Agree	E Strongly Agree
Choice will improve parent involvement participation and support.	52.1	18.6		29.3
Choice will promote increases in achievement tests among minority students.	61	33.3		5.6
Choice will foster higher faculty morale.	66.5	25.8		7.7
Choice promotes competition among districts, which will improve the quality of schools.	50.6	20.5		28.9
Choice will expand educational opportunities for low and moderate income families.	59.4	21.8		18.8
Choice will identify districts in need of special services.	46.9	25.8		27.3
Choice is another name for school vouchers.	38.7	19.5		41.8
Choice lays the groundwork for dismantling the public school system.	50.6	18.2		31.1
Choice will lead to racial segregation	37.4	34.4		28.2
Choice will lead to socio-economic segregation.	36.6	27.7		35.7
Choice encourages athletic or other activities recruiting.	24.6	16.5		58.9
When fully implemented, choice will result in many school district consolidations.	39.2	24.5		36.3

Conclusions

It is possible to draw several conclusions from the findings previously discussed. It is apparent that most of the superintendents surveyed favor legislation permitting choice, even though their schools may have lost some students and funding. These losses, however, are relatively insignificant in the overall picture. Parents do not seem to be taking advantage of the option of changing schools when given the opportunity. This indicates a level of satisfaction with their present situation. When choices are made, they seem to be because of location of the school or convenience. Choice has not had much of an impact on the curriculum, since the vast majority of districts have neither added nor deleted any courses. While superintendents favor choice, they do not fully embrace most of the arguments offered for supporting school choice.

To answer the question of prime importance, then, it seems reasonable that the answer is a fairly resounding "NO!" Much to the chagrin of its proponents, choice has not made a difference.

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